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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a method of reflective practice called "critical incident" which was used to examine teacher trainees' educational assumptions. A qualitative case study of one fifth-year teaching intern (Amy) at the University of Tennessee represents the experience of seven other master's level students already practicing within the elementary classroom. The research investigated how reflective practice can serve the classroom teacher. Three major assumptions about reflective practice were that: (1) beliefs and values, learned early in life as cues and symbols from parents, will affect actions of beginning teachers; (2) teachers who practice reflection about their teaching decisions will become lifelong learners; and (3) the combined knowledge of teaching professionals as they collaborate will be greater than the sum of the parts of individual knowledge. The theoretical basis for the study was transformation theory, which implies that one's personal assumptions based on beliefs and values will change during a reflective process about actions taken during a critical incident. Study participants wrote retrospective educational autobiographies describing their experience of school, then wrote about a "critical incident" from daily practice in their own teaching experience. Finally, in classroom discussion, the graduate teacher education students searched for assumptions as a result of the learning that took place during the process. Findings led to the recommendation that reflective practice be used as an action-oriented means of understanding one's underlying assumptions about teaching in the classroom. (ND)

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TEACHING AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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Within colleges of education, a kind of "group think" allows education majors to believe that all persons value and support the schooling process of children in the same way. Teacher trainees have grown up in middle class families that believe in "school." Parents have informed their children that teachers are to be respected: Should the child get in trouble with the teacher at school, the child will be in trouble with the parents at home. School rules are to be obeyed. As we achieve cultural diversity in the classroom, the teacher trainee must examine how one's assumptions about school differ from those of the student and of the student's parent. Without examining how one's beliefs, values, and rules of thumb differ from the client's, teachers will not be prepared for the real world of the classroom, especially if the assignment happens to be the inner city classroom.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a method of reflective practice called critical incident which was utilized to examine teacher trainee's educational assumptions. A qualitative case study of one fifth-year teaching intern (Amy) at the University of Tennessee represents the experience of seven other master's level students already practicing within the elementary classroom. They put the following steps to

reflective practice into action. The research question was: "How can reflective practice serve the classroom teacher?" Three major assumptions about reflective practice were: (1) that our beliefs and values, which we learn early in life as cues and symbols from our parents, will affect the actions that we take as we begin a teaching career, (2) that teachers who practice reflection about their teaching decisions will become lifelong learners, and (3) that the combined knowledge of teaching professionals as they collaborate will be greater than the sum of the parts of individual knowledge.

The theoretical basis for the study was that of Mezirow (1990) entitled Transformation Theory. This theory implies that one's personal assumptions based on beliefs and values will change during a reflective process about actions taken during a critical incident. The basic concepts of transformation theory follow:

A. The symbols that we project onto our sense perceptions are filtered through meaning perspectives.

B. The resulting "loaded" perception is objectified through speech; language is a system of ideal objects in the form of signs.

C. Meaning is an interpretation, and to make meaning is to construe or interpret experience.

D. Meaning is construed both prelinguistically, through cues and symbolic models, and through language.

Transformative learning involves reflective assessment of one's assumptions.

In order to gain a base line meaning perspective about educational practice, Amy and the seven others wrote a retrospective educational autobiography describing the experience of school. Parent's expectations about school performance were included as a means of examining beliefs and values instilled at an early age. All of the statements made represent a traditional and conventional pro-education point of view as follows:

> I grew up in a small community, a place where everybody knew everybody. My family structure was about as traditional as you could get . . . . I lived a pretty secure life.
>
> If I got in trouble at school, you could bet I was going to be in more trouble at home. My parents had a good rapport with the teachers; I knew I had to do my best and behave or they would find out that same day.
>
> I believe that parent, community, teacher relationships are essential in a teaching profession.

Some of the statements from another typical educational autobiography follow as quoted material with her consent:

> My family played a very vital role in my education. My parents always put education first in priorities. They expected my two older brothers and I to do our very best, but they understood if our best was not always an A. I was expected to do my homework when

> I came in from school before I watched television, played, or did other extra activities. My parents always took the time to discuss my day with me and make me feel like school was important. They would also look over my school work every night and if it was needed, would offer help . My parents taught me to respect teachers, to do my very best working toward my goals, and to value education.
>
> The second group that played an important part in my beliefs was the church. It taught me to respect my elders, to know the difference between right and wrong, to always hold firm to my beliefs and values, and that one should always continue to learn.
>
> The third group were teachers, especially my elementary teachers. My teachers seemed very enthusiastic about teaching, and very concerned about each child's progress. The teachers I had in school always seemed to go that extra step in their influence on my choice of becoming a teacher. From the time I saw my first grade teacher teaching, I knew that one day, I wanted to be a teacher just like her. (Susan Hammett-Rhea for Ed. C & I 568, 1995)

After the educational autobiographies were completed and presented to the class, the students then reflected upon what "school" had been like for a grandparent, a parent, themselves, and now, for the students within their own classrooms. By discussing the educational process over four generations, the students experienced, through dialogue, the changes in assumptions. Grandmothers rarely had completed high school. Aunts and uncles had left school to "help out on the farm." There were no labels such as "Dropout" or "Learning Disabled." Children did not spend hours in front of T.V. Students had "responsibilities" at home and at school. Teachers were respected; the teacher was always right! Each student became aware of how assumptions concerning "school" had changed over four

generations. By examining these changed educational assumptions, the students were able to name some of their own assumptions about school and educational process.

The next step in the reflective practice process was for each student to choose a "critical incident" from daily practice. The student was given guidelines from Mezirow (1990) on how to write about the incident. The guidelines for writing follow:

1. Describe in writing an incident giving the setting in which the problem occurred, the people involved, the roles these people played, and the action the intern took when the problem occured.

2. Record thoughts and feelings related to the incident as it happened and after the action took place, being careful not to interpret or to analyze the actions taken.

Amy wrote her critical incident in the third person as follows:

> Amy is an intern at Jefferson (pseudonym) Elementary School. She is working on her masters and must complete a year of internship in order to fill the master requirements. She was placed in a kindergarten class with twenty-one students.
>
> One day her supervising teacher left her with the class to run a class related errand. She left at lunch time and was to return before the children went home. This left Amy alone with the class for about three hours.
>
> Immediately following lunch the children are to lie down for about a twenty to thirty minute rest period. After the rest period

they are taken outside if weather permits.

On this particular day one of the students refused to rest during rest time. The consequence for not choosing to rest at nap time is to sit out during play time. Despite numerous warnings the child chose not to rest and to make repeated outbursts and disturbances.

Having to stand her ground Amy tells the student he must sit out during play time. As the class proceeds outside, the child is making remarks that his is not going to sit where he is supposed to. After numerous verbal attempts to make the child sit down, the intern finally gives up and realizes that her pushing is only making matters worse as it has in the past. She chooses to ignore the child's behavior as long as the child is not playing.

As time progresses the child proceeds to edge up in the grass towards the door of the building about forty feet from her. Sticking to her decision she chooses not to say anything and keeps him in her sight. She asks two other teachers, who are also interns, to help her keep an eye on him. All three would frequently look his way about every twenty to thirty seconds.

All of a sudden the child was gone. Amy went into a bit of a panic but calmed herself by saying he had to be somewhere close and was probably hiding from her. She asked the other interns to watch her class and she started with her search. To her dismay and slight terror, he was nowhere to be found. She had a "real" teacher help her look for him. She began to panic after about eight minutes had passed, and she had searched the entire outside play area and the obvious places he might go such as the classroom or the office. She did not want to involve the office because she did not want the principal to think she was inadequate and couldn't control her class. As she made one last round of the building a fourth intern asked her if she was looking for the boy. She then told her that his mother had picked him up.

According to the fourth intern the mother had motioned the child to the door of the building and then asked him if he was in trouble. The child did not answer his mother and she did not question him again. She left the building with the child and told no one as she left. The time was not taken to stop by the child's classroom and pick up his belongings. They were still in the classroom when Amy returned with her class. It was as if the mother's actions were intentional.

After Amy presented the critical incident to the class as "her story," students asked what and why questions as described by Peters (1990) in his chapter "The Action-Reason-Thematic Technique, ARTT." Each action was separated from another beginning with, "Why did you choose this incident to discuss in class?" followed by "What was your first action?" and "Why did you decide upon this act?" Step by step, each action is discussed and then a rationale given by Amy as though a non-judgmental qualitative interview was in progress. It is imperative that Amy's story be told from her meaning perspective, and that others keep the questions open-ended. As stated by Peters, "The procedure involves identifying both verbally expressed reasons and hidden premises, which are unspoken reasons for actions." The hidden premises are the themes referred to in the ARTT model.

An example of a hidden premise is the interviewee's use of language. Amy spoke of her mentoring teacher as a "real" teacher even though Amy was trained as a teacher for five years. When we asked her to define what she meant by the use of the word real, we established that she did not perceive herself as an equal to the classroom teacher. When Amy discovered that her student was missing, she did not report the incident to the office first. When we asked the why question, Amy said that she

knew her mentoring teacher broke the rules by leaving and that Amy was trying to protect her absence from the classroom. The students asked about the playground's placement at school in relationship to the school building and parking lot. They ascertained that the playground and parking lot were next to each other. As a student articulates an action and a reason for that action in a non-threatening atmosphere, every student in the room learns from that experience.

In the next step in classroom discussion, students searched for assumptions before the incident occurred and the changed assumptions as a result of the learning that took place during the process. Amy assumed that a child would never leave the area without informing the teacher in charge. She thought that there were enough teachers watching the student so that he was safe even though apart from the group. She assumed, as most teachers would, that a parent would never remove a child from school without reporting to the office.

After our classroom discussion, all of the students were aware that not all parents respect teachers in the way that their parents had. After Amy's discussion of the incident, she listed her thoughts as follows:

1. I had been extremely naive about what people were capable of.
2. I should not have allowed the classroom teacher to leave; I should

never have been left alone as an intern.

3. The student should have been taken to the office long before the ongoing incidents got to this point.

4. Parent notes should be sent home at the beginning of the year stating that a child is not allowed to leave the school without classroom teacher awareness. These notes should be signed and returned.

The class discussed a teacher's priorities concerning the safety of a child when one is missing. With a parking lot next to the playground, the potential for kidnapping by someone other than a parent was discussed. The fact that the mentoring teacher was breaking the rules put undue stress on Amy. One of her statements uncovered a hidden agenda: "If I 'ratted' on my teacher, I would probably never get a job in that county!" It was suggested that when rules were broken by the mentoring teacher early in the year, that an immediate discussion initiated by Amy about her level of anxiety might have eliminated the later episode.

Our conclusion about the use of the critical incident in practicing reflective practice is that we recommend this as an action-oriented means of understanding one's underlying assumptions about teaching in the classroom. Every student in the college classroom was able to assess one's assumptions about parent's support of the schooling process, about

how one would deal with the mentoring teacher breaking the rules, about one's first step when a child is missing, about how one would follow through after an incident like this. It is imperative for new teachers to understand that values and beliefs of students and their parents may be very different from their own, especially in our culturally diverse classrooms.

Transformative learning takes place only when one compares assumptions in place before the reflective process to those changed assumptions because of the step by step process of asking the what and why questions within a group. It would be possible for classroom teachers to organize such a group of their own to promote the lifelong learning process. Every teacher would learn from the presentation of the critical incident of each other and the discussion process based on ARTT: of Action-Reason-Thematic Technique.

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